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Notes on the Long-billed Curlew

BY P. M. SILLOWAY, LEWISTON, MONT.

[Read before the Northern Division of the Cooper Orn. Club, July 7, 1900.]

UPON taking up my residence in the region of central Montana, I was attracted by the Long-billed Curlew, (*Numenius longirostris*.) It was reported to me as being one of the early migrants to appear on the prairie, and in the spring of '99 I eagerly waited for an introduction to this bird new to my avian list. However, the spring being unusually backward, it was near evening on the 24th of April when I welcomed the first curlews of the season. Two birds flew over, uttering loud, long-drawn whistles, and I knew that the curlews had come.

Though the season of 1900 was as much earlier as the preceding season was backward, I failed to see curlews until April 25. I had been repeatedly informed by the natives, however, that the curlews were around, and it is safe to say that the middle of April, 1900, saw these birds represented on the prairies.

After their arrival, the curlews inhabit the high, dry prairies, flying restlessly from one portion to another, showing a tendency to associate in pairs, though as couples, these birds are not inseparable. In the mating season, one of the pair is likely to follow the other in a few moments, when the first bird has flown far over the prairie to a more distant station. At any time the loud, prolonged whistling of these birds, either when on the ground or a-wing, will call attention to their movements, warning the disturber of their domain that his presence is known and that his actions will be watched with the closest interest.

One of the pleasing sights to the ornithologist in watching the behavior of these curlews is seen when a pair are sailing upward in company a-breast of the wind, moving in perfect accord on wide-spread, motionless pinions curved gently downward, within sev-

eral feet of each other, then fluttering downward side by side or one in advance of the other, again to sail upward, uttering the characteristic whistles. There is another side to the disposition of the Long-billed Curlew, for this spring I was once startled by an unusually piercing whistle, and looking upward, I saw a curlew swooping angrily upon a Ferruginous Rough-leg that had chanced to wander over the claimed domain of this pair of *Numenii*. Time and again the curlew swooped upon the unoffending *Archibuteo* as the latter flapped heavily along the edge of the coulee, and the cliff echoed with the shrill whistles of the angry curlew.

On the other hand, the Long-billed Curlews are the victims of petty teasing by the longspurs which throng the prairie. I have repeatedly noticed McCown's Longspur, (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*,) flutter up beside a curlew, sailing upward, or attempt to strike the curlew, the latter on such occasions seldom giving any attention to the petty annoyance mentioned.

About the middle of May, 1900, I began to give serious attention to the nidification of the curlews. In looking over my authorities for data regarding time of nesting, I found the information quite unsatisfactory, Col. Goss alone giving the time, early May, for Kansas. If they nest in early May in Kansas, these birds would nest toward the latter part of May in Montana. I reasoned; but this season being unusually early, the curlews should be nesting by the middle of the month, I concluded. Fearful that only eggs with blood, bones and feathers, if eggs at all, were to be my portion, I spent much of my leisure time thereafter in following up the curlews, sadly neglecting other oological interests in the meantime. On May 18 I spent the afternoon in a drizzling rain in bootless quest of cur-

lews' eggs. On May 20 I lay behind a ridge with field glasses and watched a female, evidently just off the nest, but after having gleaned along two ridges for thirty minutes each, she slipped over one of them and then winged her way so low over the prairie that I lost sight of her.

Saturday, May 26, found me afield in a new quarter, and late in the afternoon, in crossing the highest part of a large area of fenced prairie, I excited the attention of a pair of curlews, tho' a number were moving here and there in the pasture. Having little time then to give the place extended search, I took the opportunity to walk out to the pasture on the next afternoon. Upon reaching the same quarter, a male curlew sharply whistled his displeasure at my proceeding, and as I advanced up the ridge he occasionally flew at me with angry movement. Thus working around the place, following the clews given by the male, I soon determined that the nest was within a limited area, how limited I had little idea at the time; and setting up a shattered shoulder blade that had long bleached on the prairie, I began careful search for the supposed nest. Starting from the bone as a center, I would trace a radius of about one hundred yards, then walk about forty feet in an arc of the circle, and walk back to the center. Thus I searched quite carefully every part of the semi-circle on the side of the bone where I seemed to attract most attention of the owners, but two hours of search found me ready to give up the quest, baffled as usual. Besides, it was Sunday, and I had brought nothing to carry home the eggs in, anyway, so I wended my way homeward pondering upon the deceitfulness of the curlews.

Monday afternoon, May 28, again took me afield to the appointed place. My bone still stood as a landmark, and again the male flew angrily toward me, turning abruptly upward as he passed me, giving a loud swish with his wings as he checked his forward flight. I had

all along noticed that he came at me chiefly from a particular direction, and was thus causing me to search on the side of the bone from which he came. Changing my tactics, I determined to search more closely in the direction he pointed as he flew at me; and walking in that direction about a hundred yards from the bone, after a few minutes I saw the female flattened upon the ground with tail toward me, about twenty feet away, her head and neck lying upon the ground in front of her invisible to me. My first thought was that I had stumbled upon a dead prairie chicken, so flatly was she sitting upon her nest; but as I took several steps toward her, she flew low from the nest for about thirty feet, then fluttered along the ground with flapping wings, describing an arc of a circle about forty feet distant from me.

As I was out for eggs, however, I paid but little attention to the parental efforts of the mother to mislead me, and was soon bending over my first curlew's nest. It was a well made structure, placed in a shallow depression beside a low pile of dried cow manure. The nest was made of dried weed-tops, the rim being elevated one and a half inches above the surroundings. The cavity was eight inches across and two inches deep. The general appearance of the nest gave the impression of its being quite elevated. There were four eggs, handsomely colored and marked, placed with small ends together in the middle of the nest. Incubation had scarcely begun. Three of the eggs had a ground of light greenish olive, thickly marked with blotches of dark umber and chocolate; the fourth egg has a rustier appearance, both in ground color and in markings. The eggs in this set measure about 2.70 by 2.00 inches.

Many persons think it strange that having found the object of so long a quest, the ornithologist is not satisfied, but desires to add other similar specimens to his cabinet. Most of the mem-

bers of the Cooper Ornithological Club, however, will not think it strange that the next afternoon found me afield in quest of curlews' eggs. The field where I had watched the female so long, was the place of operations, and after an hour of tramping I excited the attention of a male. Keeping on the move aimlessly to get him to play "hot" or "cold," I was lead through a barbed wire fence into a field which I had crossed. Beginning my search in the direction the male pointed as he frequently flew toward me, after less than an hour of careful scrutiny of the ground in the supposed quarter of the circle about my central stick, I saw the female as before flattened upon the ground beside a pile of dried cow chips, less than twenty feet from me. As in the former instance, she fluttered from the nest as I approached her, and tried to lead me away by feigning to be crippled. One of her tricks was to lower her head, with bill almost touching the ground, and run along in a shame-faced sort of way.

This nest was constructed almost like the first; but was situated more among grass blades, which grew up around the rim of the structure. It contained four eggs, placed like the others, with the pointed ends toward the middle of the nest. The four eggs are nearly alike, the ground being more greenish than those of the first set, one of them having markings noticeably wreathed at the larger end, another having markings thickly congregated upon the large end, all having other markings quite generally distributed besides those mentioned. These eggs average about three sixteenths of an inch less in length than those of the first set.

It was my fortune once to enjoy an outing in an Illinois swamp with a friend who was collecting for his first season. Frequently, when he came upon a nest of coot or gallinule, I would suggest that as they were so plentiful and the grounds so close, we might

leave the eggs. He would reply that though they seemed so plentiful then, another year they might not be so abundant, as the water might be too high or too low, or the birds might leave; hence it was best to get all we wanted then, and we should have them at any future time when they might be scarcer. I have always remembered my friend's advice, and so when the next morning came, May 30, it brought me leisure in the forenoon to continue the quest for curlews' nests. Taking my son with me, to help play the curlews and thus save time, I went farther into the pasture where I had found my first set, as on that occasion I had counted as many as twelve birds in view while searching for the first nest. The pasture being more than a mile in length. I knew that there was room for more than one nest, and on getting into the farther side of the field, as my son was walking down a long slope at the end of a gentle swell, he attracted the attention of a male, which hovered over him uttering its cackling whistle, the sound reminding me of the jarring of a freight train as it is about stopping with set brakes.

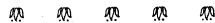
Following my tactics as on former occasions, we found the nest in a search of less than an hour. My son saw the female on her nest, and remarked that at first he thought it was a dead chicken. This bird sat so closely that I could touch her with a walking stick I carried, before she fluttered from her eggs; and as I suspected, they were advanced in incubation, though not enough to give trouble in blowing them. There were four eggs, placed as usual in the nest. Three of them are the usual light greenish olive pattern, with heavy blotching upon the large end of two of them; the fourth has a much lighter ground, thus furnishing a new pattern of coloration quite different from any of the other eggs described.

At the risk of being denominated an "egg hog," I shall have to confess that

the following afternoon, May 31, found me back in the pasture where I had taken my second set. After rambling about until 6 P. M., having encountered a shower in the meantime, as I was making a final round before starting homeward, I noticed that a curlew gave evidence of a nest in the neighborhood. It took me about an hour to locate it, but by "trekking" in the direction indicated by my signs, I found the female ensconced on her nest in the lower portion of the meadow, among grass growing higher than her back. She sat until I could touch her with my stick as in the preceding instance, and then fluttered from her four eggs. The nest was similar to those described, being mostly built upon the ground, though the site was a slight depression, and besides a pile of dried cow manure. These eggs were heavily incubated, and were much smaller than any before

found, averaging about 2.42 in length by 1.82 in breadth. Their ground is the light greenish olive pattern, blotched more about the large end, three of them showing scrawling blotches of black upon the large end. It will be seen that the eggs of *Numenius longirostris* show decided variation in color of markings, and I know of no other eggs presenting a handsomer appearance in the collector's cabinet. The books report that sets consist of 3-4 eggs, but it does not appear to me than a full first set can contain less than four eggs.

There are many other interesting facts in the history of the Long-billed Curlews, but as this article has more than exceeded the space desired by a patient editor, the future shall have to care for the further interests of *Numenius longirostris*.



The Little Widow

A True Chapter in the Life History of a Pair of Mockingbirds

BY MOLLIE BRYAN, ORANGE, CAL.

DURING the summer of '96 a pair of Mockingbirds nested in a big pine on the lawn, rearing their young among the shrubbery of the garden, levying on the fruit from the orchard close by, as part payment for the beautiful music daily rendered by the head of the house. When not busy with family cares, our singer decided, in return for the rent of his home, to superintend affairs of the ranch, at least in so far as to say who should or who should not come within our garden gate.

Being of rather a pugnacious disposition he made it very manifest who were his favorites. He had an especial spite for a beautiful black and white cat, "Tom," that daily followed my uncle, who lived near, as a dog would. He always escorted Tom half way home scolding and darting at him with great vigor, while Tom rolled on his back,

with all four feet in the air, to ward off the sharp pecks of the bird, but apparently enjoying each encounter. My uncle, becoming tired of having Tom thus persecuted whenever he chose to visit his neighbors, took his gun and put an end to it.

The first I knew of the death of our songster, I missed his morning song, and later in the day my attention was attracted by the female as she flew about the yard and garden, apparently searching for something—and Tom came and went unmolested. On inquiry I learned what, to me, was a tragedy, for all day the poor little mate went from one tree to another, in and out of the bushes, watching sharply each person that passed from the house, constantly uttering a peculiar, mournful,—we could almost imagine accusing—cry, which enlisted our sympathies.

All summer the "little widow," as we